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ABSTRACT

This study examined the quality of verbal exchanges between teachers and children in 4 primary classrooms and the 4-year-old groups in 4 child care centers in Australia. Data were collected during small group activities for a minimum of 4 hours. Interactions were audiotaped, transcribed, and divided into messages which are equivalent to clauses with or without embedding. Messages were analyzed using five semantic networks. Results from the Year 1 classrooms indicated that one teacher chose commands in over one third of the messages, mainly unsupported exhortative commands to act, and another teacher chose commands almost half the time, but included non-exhortative, supported commands to "cognize." Child care center results indicated that teachers often dominated talk, asking several questions but not giving children a chance to respond. Fewer commands were used in the child care centers than in the Year 1 classrooms and there was a higher incidence of non-exhortative commands; however, few commands were supported with information which might help children understand why they were being commanded to engage in particular behaviors. Results suggest that semantic networks offer a means of mapping quality talk which parallels different teacher leadership styles, such as democratic and authoritarian styles. These semantic networks allow analysis of verbal interaction options not used by teachers and children. (Contains 34 references.) (KDFB)

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QUALITY TALK IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

The first 15 of the 52 principles set out in *Putting Children First: Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Handbook (1993)* focus on quality interactions between staff, parents, and children. However, quality is difficult to measure. How do general principles on quality interaction translate, for example, into verbal exchanges? This paper explores features of quality talk in early childhood educational programs for children between birth and eight years, and discusses how quality can be documented.

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INTRODUCTION

In all areas of Australian society today there is increased emphasis on accountability and on quality. Education is no exception. The first 15 of the 52 principles set out in *Putting Children First: Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Handbook (1993)* focus on quality interactions between staff, parents, and children. The core principles (i.e., those in which 'Good quality' is mandatory for accreditation) are these:

Principle 1 Staff interactions with children are warm and friendly;

Principle 2 Staff treat all children equally and try to accommodate their individual needs: they respect diversity of background;

Principle 3 Staff treat all children equally and try to accommodate their individual needs: they treat both sexes without bias;

Principle 4 Staff use a positive approach in guidance and discipline;

Principle 10 There is verbal and written communication with all families about the centre;

Principle 11 There is active interchange between parents and staff; and

Principle 14 Staff communicate well with each other.

These are general principles which, to form part of an accreditation process, need to be translated into quality practices. The focus of this paper is verbal exchanges between teachers and children in four Year 1 primary classrooms and the four year old groups in four childcare centres. Data were collected during small group activities for a minimum of four hours. Interactions were audiotaped, transcribed, and divided into 'messages' which are equivalent to clauses with or without embedding (Hasan, 1983). Messages were analysed using as interpretative tools five semantic networks, one of which is discussed in this paper (Appendix 1). It is suggested that semantic networks offer a means of mapping quality talk.

FEATURES OF QUALITY TALK

Studies of adult child talk over the past twenty years have attempted to identify features of high quality interaction. Some of these are:

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- planned provision for development of children's competence to use language for a wide range of functions, oral and written (e.g., Tough, 1977; Wells, 1981; Derewianka, 1990);
- talk which is appropriate in terms of children's backgrounds, their development, their interests, and the social situation (Bernstein, 1975; Heath, 1982);
- effective scaffolding, so that adult talk is matched with a child's talk in terms of complexity of language level and ideas, with adults listening attentively and sensitively to understand a child's meaning, then developing and extending that meaning (Vygotsky, 1987; Rogoff, 1990; Banham, in press); and
- a balance in verbal interactions, with children as well as adults, initiating interactions, extended turns, and a joint construction and negotiation of shared meaning - conversation, not interrogation (Christie, 1988; Makin, 1994).

Often overlooked in discussion of quality talk is the important background assumption that there is a match between the language(s) spoken by children and that spoken by the teacher. If this is not the case, special consideration must be given to issues such as whether a child's home language will be replaced by English or whether education will assist the child to become bilingual (Wong-Fillmore, 1991; Makin, Campbell & Jones-Diaz, 1995).

QUALITY VERSUS REALITY

More research has been carried out in upper primary schools than in child care centres. It has generally focussed upon whole class activities. A summary of features of typical classroom talk, as supported by a number of research studies, is as follows:

- child-initiated sequences are rare (Barnes, 1976);
- turns are very disparate with teacher talk dominating up to 70% (Mehan, 1979; Cazden, 1988; Reid, Forrestal & Cook, 1989);
- in a 45-minute period, the amount of time left for a class of 30 to contribute is an average of 20 seconds per pupil (Bullock Report, 1975);
- questions are primarily low level, requiring recall of factual information. They are the province of the teacher and are usually display questions (Perrott, 1988); and students respond with one word or one sentence answers (Reid et al, 1989).

The higher adult-child ratio in early childhood programs for children under the age of five, the smaller group sizes, and a child-centred curriculum might lead one to expect different typical features in these situations. Yet a number of studies have found many limitations in verbal interaction in early childhood programs, for example:

- little use of language for reasoning, predicting, problem solving (Tough, 1977);
- a more limited set of conversational options than is present in the home (Wells, 1981);
- little sense of intellectual struggle and of real attempts to communicate (Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Makin, 1994);
- lowered expectations of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Tizard & Hughes, 1984); and

- lowered expectations of children whose home language backgrounds are languages other than English (Makin, 1983; Torr, 1993).

MAPPING QUALITY TALK

Collection of naturalistic language as the aim of the researcher presents a complex situation. Teachers differ as do children. Curriculum content differs. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the children differ as do their language backgrounds, their gender, their place within the family, their out-of-school experiences, their moods and the group dynamics. The presence of an investigator inevitably affects naturalistic talk, especially if microphones or video cameras intrude on the scene. It is important to find appropriate instruments which will reveal as objectively as possible and in fine detail, comparable levels of quality.

With so many variables in classrooms, even if strictly controlled scientific research were able to be undertaken, it would be unlikely to result in completely replicable studies or in widely generalisable results. Indeed, the types of questions to which teachers and teacher educators would like to find answers (e.g., the relationship between language and learning) may well be unanswerable in any final sense.

Researchers' study of naturalistic data have been supported by developments in the philosophy of science since the 1960s and '70s, development which has contributed to qualitative research becoming accepted as both valid and valuable over recent years. Popper (1969), Kuhn (1970), and Lakatos (1974), were concerned with the **process** of gaining knowledge. They accepted as inevitable the intermingling of theory and observation, and the impossibility of avoiding some degree of assumptive colouration of data collected in any research taking place in real life social environments. Chalmers (1976:60), in his summary of developments in the philosophy of science of that period, cites a vivid metaphor used by Popper (cited in Chalmers, 1968: 111):

The empirical basis of objective science has f thus nothing "absolute " about it. Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or "given" base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.

As researchers begin to drive down their piles, they do so from within a particular framework of beliefs, for example, the belief that knowledge is a social construct, with language as the main tool with which human beings construct and interpret the context in which they live (Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1987; Luria, 1976; Rogoff, 1990; Halliday, 1975).

Another belief, difficult to 'prove' in the strict scientific sense, is that teacher-child talk influences children's learning (Bernstein, 1975; Well, 1981; Heath, 1982; Cazden, 1988). Increased awareness of this influence - how it operates and what its effects may be - can lead to conscious adaptation of some aspects of individual style. Teachers are of central importance in the formal educational process, particularly in the early years of education. Teachers can identify habitual aspects of their interaction style and hence identify areas for change. Identification of areas for change can be the first step in improving interaction quality. Semantic networks (Appendix 1) offer a way of building a picture of what the participants in educational activities are doing when they talk with each other.

SEMANTIC NETWORKS

One way in which semantic networks can be used is to identify some of the features which realise different teacher leadership styles, in particular, democratic and authoritarian leadership styles

(Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939). In two recent projects, teachers and children were studied in four Year 1 classrooms (Makin, 1994) and in four child care centres (Makin & White, in press).

In order to carry out the initial investigation in the Year 1 classrooms, insights from two theoretical perspectives were combined: systemic functional linguistics as developed primarily by Halliday (1985 and elsewhere); and role theory, as developed by Lewin et al (1939). Features of Hasan's message semantics network (1983) were selected and modified in order to produce five networks which paralleled leadership criteria as described by Lewin et al (Appendix 2). These five networks provided interpretative tools which enabled the four teachers to be placed along a continuum of more democratic to more authoritarian. Some of the characteristic features of the democratic style echo Rogoff's description (1990) of effective scaffolding, in particular, involving children in setting goals, helping them see why they are doing something (the overall purpose) and how different activity steps along the way contribute to the overall goal, and giving them increasing responsibility as they become able to handle it. One of the four teachers in the Year 1 classrooms was found to display a style which shared features of both democratic and authoritarian styles. In this case, a leadership style which realised certain features of authoritarianism also made explicit to children that they were expected to be thinkers and decision-makers and to take responsibility for their own work. This style was categorised as *predominant*.

Certain semantic characterisations were seen as of central importance in differentiating role types:

- questions: opinion-seeking and explanation-seeking;
- evaluations, (positive and negative) and support for evaluations. Also, whether children were given supporting information which helped them understand why they were being evaluated in a particular way;
- non-exhortative commands, commands to cognise and support for commands and supporting information as per evaluations; and
- offers of global information.

A SEMANTIC NETWORK FOR COMMANDS

One of the five semantic networks used focussed on commands (Appendix 1). This network allows a comparison of different types of commands relating to task facilitation. Classroom participants (both T and C) can be commanded to be (e.g., *be a good boy,)*, to act (e.g., go *and get it)*, to attend (e.g., *look at this one)*, or to cognise (e.g., *now you have to decide)*. At this level, it is possible to gain an initial idea as to whether there is an orientation within the classroom to being thoughtful and reflective, or whether organisation does not encourage this orientation. The distinction between Da2 (command to act) and Da4 (command to cognise) is particularly important in this regard. The schooling context might lead one to expect a strong representation of 'cognise' commands. However, this expectation was not fulfilled.

The next level of Network D offers a way of differentiating between non-exhortative and exhortative commands. In general, non-exhortative commands are realised by interrogatives, and, less commonly, by statements, often prefaced and/or modalised. Exhortative commands are realised most commonly by imperatives. This distinction introduces the possibility of the presence or absence of addressee negotiation power. The presence of such freedom or lack of freedom can, of course, be illusory; and teachers, perhaps unfairly, are often accused of overuse of a falsely democratic mode of expression which suggests more freedom than may be found to exist if a child actually takes it at face value. The *would you like to put away your books now and come and sit on the mat* type of command is not normally expected to be answered by a *no, I 'd rather finish what I 'm doing*.

Non-exhortative commands can be enunciative or suggestive. It might be expected that in a more democratically-led classroom, non exhortative commands will be more common than exhortative commands. On a more delicate level, non exhortative commands may in turn be enunciative or suggestive. Enunciative commands may differ as to whether they allow discretion or suggest obligation, and as to whether they are consultative or assertive. Suggestive commands, as Hasan (1988:25) writes, blur *the boundary between co-operation and demand*. She suggests further that *selection of this feature is conducive to the suppression of distinctions between authority and benefaction, between command and offer, between co-ercion and co-operation*. Speaker-inclusion in suggestive commands such as *let's get dressed* does not represent intended duality of action. Speaker-inclusion in exhortative commands, such as *let's put away the blocks* does, however, represent an offer of assistance. This distinction is seen as being one way to indicate whether the leader acts as a group member. Exhortative commands may also be emphatic or non-emphatic, and, if emphatic, emphatic for the addressee(s) or for the action. Group membership would seem more likely to be conveyed through speaker-inclusive emphasis on action rather than on the participant(s).

The final divisions in Network D relate to whether or not commands are supported by reasons, by consequences, either for the addressee(s) or for the project, or by other information which may give the addressee(s) insight into the impetus behind a command.

DISCUSSION

Salient questions seem to be:

- what are children commanded to do: to be, to act, to attend, to cognise?
- are commands absolute, or do they offer room for negotiation?
- are commands specific to the immediate context only, or is insight offered through supporting information as to how what is to be done fits within a wider perspective? and
- does T identify him or herself as a group member?

A number of interesting features emerged from application of Semantic Network D to the transcribed data from the Year I classrooms. Two of the four teachers chose the option 'command' very frequently. Lewin et al would identify both as, on this feature, demonstrating an authoritarian style. Yet, there was an important difference in how the command option was realised. One of the teachers chose commands in over one third of messages. Commands were mainly exhortative commands to act. This teacher's commands were the least often supported of the commands of the four. This teacher appeared, upon analysis of commands, to be the most authoritarian in approach.

The other teacher chose commands almost half of the time (i.e., even more frequently). However, she also showed the widest range of commands, with 'cognise' being a frequent choice, something which differentiated her from the other teachers. She ranked high in terms of both non-exhortative commands and supported commands. She frequently exhorted children to *think, decide, choose, vote, consider*. This teacher demonstrated what was named the *predominant* style. It shares some features of the authoritarian style, including a high incidence of commands. However, the type of command led children towards becoming empowered learners. This teacher's aim was a more democratic classroom. If children are to learn to be learners and to develop a problem-solving orientation to learning, it would seem useful for teachers to ensure that cognitive activity is expected and valued. This is an important part of quality interaction

Analysis of data from four child care centres (Makin & White, in press) using semantic networks revealed that even in a small group art activity in a setting designed for four year olds, some of the

features identified as common in primary school data were also evident in the child care setting: teacher domination of talk in general; teacher domination of questions; few opinion-seeking questions. It was common in both settings for questions not to be answered because teachers continue to speak, therefore not offering children the opportunity of responding. There was, in both settings, teacher domination of commands, with few instances of supporting information. The main differences between the child care centres and the Year 1 centres were that fewer 'display' questions were asked in the centres, in other words, questions tend to be more genuine with the teacher actually seeking information from the children which she did not already know.

The teachers in the child care centres chose the command options considerably less frequently than did the Year 1 teachers. There was a higher incidence of non-exhortative commands which offer more room for negotiation. However, very few commands (4%) were supported with information which might help children understand why they are commanded to engage in certain behaviours or activities.

CONCLUSION

To improve the quality of verbal interaction between staff and children in child care centres, instruments are needed which help map clearly what is happening and which give teachers objective feedback on their habitual interaction patterns.

The small group may simply be the large group writ small (i.e., with more similar than dissimilar features of classroom discourse in evidence). In all eight settings which were studied, the transmission model was evident in small group interactions.

Semantic networks set out very clearly ranges of options open to speakers. They can be as detailed as is required and can yield a clear description of habitual semantic choice. In this way, profiles of teacher-child interaction styles can be developed. Another benefit arises from the fact that, when teacher-child talk is investigated, it may be useful to record, not only the presence of certain features in the discourse of teachers and children, but also the fact that there are options in verbal interaction which are not usually taken up by teachers or by children. Such omission may be equally meaningful. Absence of choice cannot be subjected to statistical procedures. One of the strengths of semantic networks as interpretative tools is their ability to reveal clearly what is not happening as well as what is happening.

Semantic networks can give insight into how talk in education settings contributes to the joint construction of knowledge which is the task of education and can give individuals and groups insight into their habitual semantic choices. This can help us move beyond generalised 'motherhood' statements to improve specific features of quality talk in early childhood programs.

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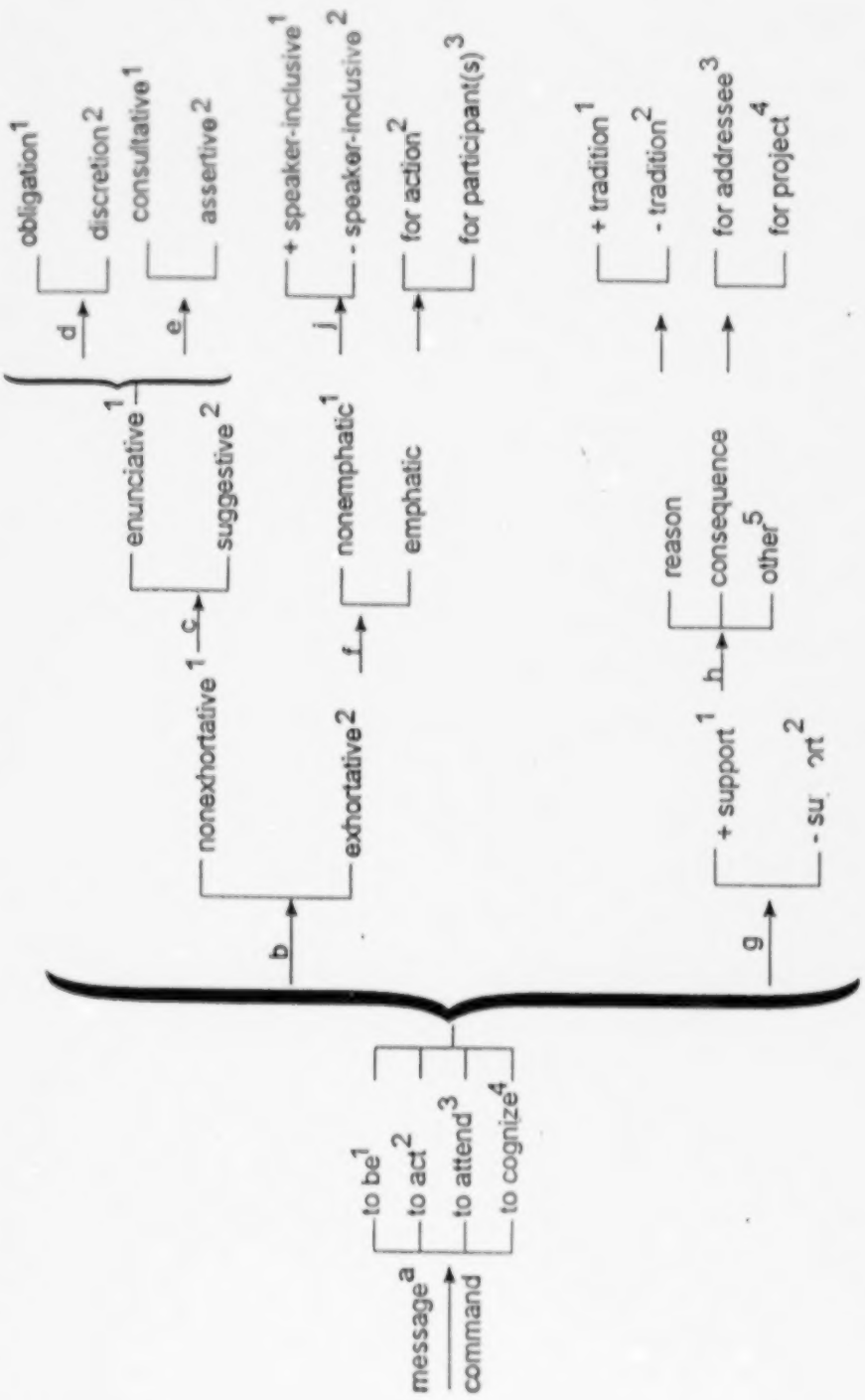
Appendix 1



Network D - Commands

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Appendix 2

Authoritarian	Democratic	Laissez-faire
1. All determination of policy by the leader.	1. All policies a matter of group discussion and decision, encouraged and assisted by the leaders.	1. Complete freedom for group or individual decision, without any leader participation.
2. Techniques and activity steps dictated by the authority, one at a time, so that future steps were always uncertain to a large degree.	2. Activity perspective gained during first discussion period. General steps to group goal sketched, and where technical advice was needed the leader suggested two or three alternative procedures from which choice could be made.	2. Various materials supplied by the leader, who made it clear that he would supply information when asked. He took no other part in group discussion.
3. The leader usually dictated the particular work task and work companions of each member.	3. The members were free to work with whomever they chose, and the division of tasks was left up to the group.	3. Complete non-participation by leader.
4. The dominator was 'personal' in his praise and criticism of the work or each member, but remained aloof from active group participation except when demonstrating. He was friendly or impersonal rather than openly hostile.	4. The leader was 'objective' or 'fact minded' in his praise and criticism, and tried to be a regular group member in spirit without doing too much of the work.	4. Very infrequent comments on member activities unless questioned, and no attempt to participate or interfere with the course of events.

(Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939:273)